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ABSTRACT

The Survey on the Impact of Training on Relationships (SIT) was completed by 165 triathletes and 127 of their partners, assessing their perceptions of the impact of training, stresses associated with training and exercise, coping strategies, and a measure of overall family functioning. Sixty-eight percent of the triathletes and 73% of their partners indicated that training and exercise had a positive impact on their relationship. Their major stress was lack of time as a couple, which they most often addressed by either setting aside time together or by exercising together. By comparing those couples who were happy with the experience, and those unhappy with it, six specific recommendations are provided for couples dealing with commitment to serious training and exercise. Appendices are: statistical analyses; Fact Sheet on the Impact of Training on Relationships; and quotes from the study. (Author)

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The Impact of Training on Relationships

or

The Trials and Tribulations of Triathloning Twosomes

by

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Abstract

The Survey on the Impact of Training on Relationships (SIT) was completed by 165 triathletes and 127 of their partners, assessing their perceptions of the impact of training, stresses associated with training and exercise, coping strategies, and a measure of overall family functioning. Sixty-eight percent of the triathletes and 73% of their partners indicated that training and exercise had a positive impact on their relationship. Their major stress was lack of time as a couple, which they most often addressed by either setting aside time together or by exercising together. By comparing those couples who were happy with the experience and those unhappy with it, six specific recommendations are provided for couples dealing with commitment to serious training and exercise.

The Impact of Training on Relationships

or

The Trials and Tribulations of Triathloning Twosomes*

It's hard to believe that a person can take a discretionary twelve hours a week out of their schedule, radically alter eating and sleeping patterns, spend unheard of sums on a bicycle and techno-gadgets, and have it benefit one's closest personal relationship. Yet 68% of the triathletes and 73% their partners who participated in the Survey on the Impact of Training overwhelmingly said that the impact was positive.

Survey questionnaires were distributed with the race results of three triathlons of varying distances (the Carolina Triathlon, the Wilmington Family YMCA-PHC Triathlon and the Texas Hill Country Triathlon - half Ironman). Some 165 triathletes (17.5% response rate) answered questions about themselves, their perceptions of the impact of their training, the most common stresses, the most common coping strategies and completed a brief measure of overall family functioning and support. The study was unique in that 127 ***partners*** of athletes provided their perspectives on the same issues.

The average triathlete in the study was 37 years old, trains 12.2 hours each week and has been competing in triathlons for 4.5 years. The hours of training each week ranged from 3 to 30, with their partners almost always reporting more hours than the athlete. The majority of respondents considered themselves recreational (37%) or competitive (53%) triathletes, accompanied by 3% elite and 3% novice athletes. Eighty-six percent of the athletes were male, 14% female.

Contrary to popular belief that triathletes are single and unfettered, 70% were married and 39% had children. Fifteen percent of the athletes were single and in committed relationships.

This appears to be a basically healthy *and happy* group. Athletes and their partners scored higher than the normal population on the measure of overall family functioning. Their major stress is the lack of time as a couple, which they most often address by either setting aside time together or by exercising together.

While the majority of triathletes and partners saw training as a positive experience, 17 % of the athletes and over 15% of the partners said that training had a negative impact on their relationships. Comparing the responses of these two groups-- those happy with the experience and those unhappy with it-- generated six specific recommendations for couples dealing with commitment to serious training and exercise.

#1 - Talk about the impact of training. Couples who disagreed on whether or not training was a source of stress had the lowest scores of family functioning. The simple solution is to discuss how each feels about all the changes and stresses associated with training. And remember, it takes a unanimous vote to be stress free--- if either person says it is a stress, then *it is a stress*.

#2 - Train or exercise with your partner. This was far and away the most effective coping strategy of those couples who were happy with the training process. If you and your partner are of different ability levels, train with a group. Group bike rides, running clubs and masters swim groups provide a special social and supportive environment for athletes of all abilities. A word of caution to the guys: don't offer advice or suggestions unless asked, and keep your egos in your pockets. If you always rub in how your times are faster, she will probably lose interest rapidly. On the flip side, there

are a multitude of women who can "clean your clock", so be prepared when her trophies are bigger than yours.

#3 - Make sure your partner feels important to your training and performance. Some of the highest scores of overall family functioning occurred when the partner felt as though he or she had a significant impact on performance, and the athlete said there was *no such effect*. These partners felt more important than the athletes considered them to be. It is likely that these athletes underestimated the partners' importance. Medical research has shown that the marital relationship is the single best predictor of immune system functioning, which can cripple performance in a heartbeat.

#4 - Set aside special time for your relationship. The couples happy with training recognized this as being a major stress. Most athletes are aware of the need to schedule training. The same goes for your relationship. If it's not scheduled, it probably will not happen. For those obsessed with getting stronger faster, remember that you actually get stronger during the rest and recovery time, not during hard exercise when you are tearing down muscles and cells.

#5 - Work together to address the issues of household maintenance. Unhappy couples did not recognize household maintenance as a significant stress; the happy ones did. While you are striving to reduce your race times, don't quicken your pace to relationship self-destruction.

#6 - Encourage your partner to stay socially active. Partners unhappy with training noted a decrease in social activities as a significant stress. If your partner doesn't exercise with you or a group, encourage him or her to spend time with friends even if you can't be there. You will both have stories to share with one another and neither will feel neglected.

Discussion and Future Directions

The initial results of this study may surprise many, as it runs contrary to the anecdotal information of relationships breaking up due to an obsessed triathlete. There actually may be an "evolutionary" factor involved. When the partner is highly supportive, the athlete continues triathloning; if the partner is not supportive, the athlete switches to other endeavors. This is also implied by there being more unhappy partners in relationships with athletes doing shorter races, compared with those partners of athletes competing in the half-Ironman. One could imagine an unhappy partner "enduring" an athlete's efforts for one or two seasons; but it is hard to imagine attempting a half-Ironman without strong support. Current plans include follow up interviews with participants who identified themselves as competing for two years or less to see if they are still doing triathlons, and if not, why.

Since only 14% of the athletes were female, we are attempting to gather more information on women's perspectives of these issues by surveying triathletes at the Danskin Triathlon in Austin Texas (a women only race). Questionnaires were distributed to over 600 participants, and the results are being received at this time.

As part of the project, we also hope to interview couples from the elite and professional triathlon ranks. The end product will be a detailed blueprint of how couples make the transition from neophyte to expert and how their relationships change in the process.

The ultimate goal is helping a person not just be fit-- but to be healthy. Health requires a balance in life between work, play and relationships. For years we have known the benefits of exercise upon the individual-- reduced stress, greater confidence, higher

self esteem, lower anxiety, etc. It now appears that you can strengthen your muscles and your relationship at the same time. Happy training!

*I want to give special thanks to Kristin Solsrud, BA who assisted with this project as part of her Senior Thesis at Davidson College, Davidson, NC.

Statistical Analyses

Multiple Regression for the Stresses and Coping Mechanisms That Predict Overall Family Functioning (APGAR)

Dependent Variable	Multiple R	R Square	F Change	Significance of F Change
(Partner) Setting aside special time	.2589	.0670	8.189	.0050
(Athlete) Lack of family time	.2757	.0760	9.543	.0025
(Partner) Lack of family time	.3535	.1249	16.28	.0001
(Partner) Decreased social activities	.4308	.1856	8.415	.0045

[Partner] Family Functioning (APGAR) By Couple Disagreeing on Relationship's Impact On Performance

	SS	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*Sig.*
Main	65.881	2	32.94	3.160	.048
Error	771.392	74	10.424		
Total	837.273	76	11.017		

[Partner] Family Functioning (APGAR) by Couple Disagreeing on Training as a Source of Stress

	SS	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*Sig.*
Main	107.841	2	53.921	5.358	.006
Error	956.047	95	10.064		
Total	1063.888	97	10.96		

[Athlete] Family Functioning (APGAR) by Couple Disagreeing on Training as a Source of Stress

	SS	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*Sig.*
Main	59.150	2	29.575	3.241	.043
Error	866.81	95	9.124		
Total	925.959	97	9.546		

[Athlete] Family Functioning (APGAR) by Overall Satisfaction with Training

	SS	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*Sig.*
Main	60.1722	2	30.0861	3.5864	.0316
Error	771.7857	92	8.3890		
Total	831.9579	94			

[Partner] Family Functioning (APGAR) by Overall Satisfaction with Training

	SS	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*Sig.*
Main	295.2057	2	147.6028	19.2802	.0000
Error	696.667	91	7.6557		
Total	991.8723	93			

FACT SHEET

The Impact of Training of Relationships
or
The Trial and Tribulations of Triathloning Twosomes

- ❑ Sample
  - 165 Athletes; 127 Partners
  - 86% male; 14% female
  - Average ages: athlete 37.2; partner 36.8
  - 70% married; 39% have children; 15% single and in significant relationship
  - Average time spent training per week estimated by athlete - 11.8 hr
    Average time spent training per week estimated by partner - 12.8 hr
  - Average number of years competing - 4.5 years

- ❑ Overall Results
  - Both Athletes and Partners see the impact as positive
  - Most significant stress - lack of joint time as a couple
  - Most common coping mechanisms
    1) setting aside time together as a couple
    2) training and exercising together

- ❑ Predictors of Positive Family Functioning
  - Couples agreeing on whether or not training is a source of stress
  - The partner feeling important to performance, even when the athlete says the relationship has no impact

- ❑ Comparing Couples Viewing Triathloning As Positive Vs. Those Viewing It As Negative
  - Unhappy Couples
    - Lack of joint time as a couple is more significant than all other stresses
    - Do not significantly distinguish between any of the coping mechanisms; three most common are:
      a) setting aside time together as a couple
      b) negotiating roles and expectations
      c) training or exercising together
  - Happy Couples
    - Do not significantly distinguish between the major stresses: lack of joint time as a couple and household maintenance
    - Use training and exercising together as the most significant coping mechanism

- ❑ Recommendations
  - Talk about the impact of training.
  - Train or exercise with your partner.
  - Make sure your partner feels important to your training and performance.
  - Set aside special time for your relationship.
  - Work together to address issues of household maintenance.
  - Encourage your partner to stay socially active.

QUOTES

- I could be a better triathlete if I trained more. I don't train more because spending more time with my family is most important.
- Our mismatch is not so much between athlete and non-athlete, but between competitive athlete and recreational athlete (if you call the Ironman "recreational").
- (My) first marriage ended, partly due to (my) spouse's inability to support my running, participation in marathons. She did not exercise-- this wife does.
- I train to compensate for lack of appreciation of me by others in my life.
- I "tolerate" this because it is preferable to alcohol or drugs.
- I need more friends to entertain me for the time he is still working out.
- I take a great deal of pleasure and pride in watching my husband compete. This more than compensates for any "inconveniences" during training.
- I am a recovering addict/alcoholic so I have lots of support available through many support groups. This questionnaire is a great idea.
- Basically, John and I are no longer dating as a result of his neglect towards me.
- I have never felt that my training or racing had anything but a positive effect on my family life.
- We love having triathlons, exercise and fitness in common. We admire each other's dedication and accomplishments. Our five children support us (as we do them).

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